# Mexican Wolf Blue Range Reintroduction Project
# Adaptive Management Oversight Committee
# Standard Operating Procedure

**Title:** Initial Wolf Releases
**Number:** 5.0
**File Name:** MW SOP 05.Initial Wolf Releases.Final.20050430.doc

**Purpose:** This SOP describes the process for proposing, approving, and facilitating initial releases (including release sites) of captive Mexican wolves on lands other than those within the Fort Apache Indian Reservation. It supersedes relevant sections of the 1998 Mexican Wolf Interagency Management Plan (USFWS 1998), and therefore represents, in part, the "Service Approved Management Plan" referenced in the Mexican Wolf Final Rule (50 CFR 17.84(k)).

**Exceptions:** Approved exception to this SOP: When necessary for management purposes (e.g. to compensate for a wolf mortality with genetically more valuable animals, or enhance genetics among free-ranging wolves through placement of genetically valuable pups in a den), the IFT, with approval from AMOC, may make an initial release in the Primary Recovery Zone in Arizona within five miles of an area that is currently occupied by an established pack or elements of an established pack. Such releases will be in accordance with Procedures 6b and 6c of this SOP. In addition, the IFT shall notify local livestock permittees, local county officials, and the local USFS District Ranger prior to any release of this nature.

Per SOP 2.0, AMOC must approve any additional exceptions to this SOP, with concurrence from the Director of the state wildlife Lead Agency responsible for the proposed release.

Note: Releases of wolves on the Fort Apache Indian Reservation are subject to decision-making processes and approval of the White Mountain Apache Tribe, and the San Carlos Apache Reservation is not an authorized release area.

**Background:** Initial releases are essential to Mexican wolf management and recovery. They involve release of captive wolves that have no previous experience in the wild. Under the current Mexican Wolf Final Rule (50 CFR 17.84(k)), initial releases may only occur within the Primary Recovery Zone in Arizona.

Each initial release of Mexican wolves requires substantial coordination among, and input from, all parties involved in the Reintroduction Project, including AMOC, the IFT, the captive breeding program, AMWG Cooperators, other stakeholders, and the public. Each release requires careful planning and discussion.

**Procedures:**

Note: To facilitate monitoring and management, prior to placement in release pens adult-sized Mexican wolves will receive permanent identification marks and functioning radio-collars. If an animal is not large enough to wear a collar when it is released, reasonable effort shall be made to re-capture it for collaring when it reaches an appropriate size.

1. Initial release proposal and approval. Note: The AMOC goal is to select release areas that are biologically and legally appropriate, and which represent the best opportunity for successful release without inappropriate impacts on human activities, other land uses, and other species of wildlife, and to minimize likelihood of movement beyond the BRWRA.
    a. The Field Projects Coordinator shall plan and coordinate, with assistance from the IFT Leaders, the identification and review of areas and sites for release or translocation of Mexican wolves.
    b. Initial releases shall be proposed in writing, with description of relevant material for each of the factors or considerations noted below (and any others deemed relevant by the IFT or AMOC), and comparison of the alternative sites (see Appendix A for an imperfect example that will be refined as experience and knowledge are gained).
    c. The IFT Leaders, in collaboration with the Field Projects Coordinator, shall assign one or more IFT members to draft each proposal.
    d. The IFT (acting through the Field Projects Coordinator) shall discuss with AMOC each release proposal early in its development, to ensure initial awareness as to concept and strategy.
    e. Each proposal shall be fully discussed and vetted within the IFT as it is drafted. Every effort shall be made within the IFT to reach consensus among the members on each element of the proposal.
    f. The IFT (acting through the Field Projects Coordinator) shall submit the written draft proposal to AMOC for Lead Agency review, including discussion in an AMOC meeting.
    g. AMOC shall provide comment to the IFT through the Field Projects Coordinator to indicate concurrence, suggestions or requests for revision, and/or disagreement with the proposal. Every effort shall be made within AMOC to reach consensus among the Lead Agencies on each element of the proposal, before providing comment to the IFT.
    h. The Field Project Coordinator shall coordinate IFT consideration of AMOC comment, and appropriate revision of the proposal.
    i. When AMOC is satisfied with the draft proposal, it shall be (in the following order):
        i. Discussed with the Cooperators in an AMOC meeting; and
        ii. Discussed as an agenda discussion item in the annual (January-February) AMWG “release/translocation” public meeting, which shall alternate between Arizona and New Mexico.
    j. The state wildlife Lead Agency for the state for which the release is proposed may opt to hold additional public meetings to discuss the proposal.
        i. The public meeting(s) shall be as close as possible to the proposed release area, which includes but is not limited to the specific release pen site (if multiple releases are involved, multiple meetings may be held, or a single meeting may be held in a reasonably central location);
        ii. The County in which a public meeting will be held shall be asked to convene and facilitate the meeting; and
        iii. The IFT member presenting the proposal at a public meeting shall provide AMOC with a written summary of public comment from the meeting.
    k. The IFT shall then:

i. Ensure compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), and any applicable site permitting processes, by vetting the proposal with the U.S.D.A. Forest Service (USFS) District Ranger and other USFS staff responsible for a proposed release site; and
ii. Discuss the proposal with each local permittee within five miles of the proposed release.

l. AMOC and the IFT shall then collaborate to modify the proposal as appropriate to address the comment received during the public review process outlined above.
m. If/when AMOC concurs that the proposal is acceptable, the state wildlife Lead Agency representative responsible for the release shall submit the proposal, and any relevant background information, such as dissenting Lead Agency or Cooperator opinion, to their Director.
n. The state wildlife Lead Agency Director shall approve or reject the proposal, and their AMOC representative shall then inform AMOC and the IFT of the decision.
o. The AMOC Chair shall then inform AMWG Cooperators of the decision.
p. The Lead Agency public information officers shall then inform the public of the decision (see Step 6, below).
q. The proposal and documentation of the decision on it shall be filed in the IFT office, and available to the public on request.

2. Selecting wolves for initial release
   a. The following information shall be considered in determining which wolves to release, and how many wolves to include in a release:
      i. Determining which wolves to select for release.
         (1) Reproductive history of parents
         (2) Breeding potential
         (3) Genetic contribution to the wild population
         (4) Sex and age
         (5) Prior behavior, whether in captivity or the wild
         (6) Health
      ii. Determining numbers of wolves to release in any given area.
         (1) Prey abundance and distribution
         (2) Proximity to other wolves
         (3) Logistical support required and available
         (4) Desired pack composition: sex ratio, ages, and genetics

3. Release methods
   a. Soft release – Use of a pen designed to hold wolves up to several months to acclimate them to a specific area. Such pens are typically chain link or soft plastic, and constructed with (as appropriate) electrified or non-electrified mesh.
   b. Hard release – Direct release of a wolf or wolves into the wild, as in direct release from crates into the wild or into a fladry enclosure constructed of rope with attached flagging.

4. Timing of releases
   a. Releases may occur any time during the year. However, consideration must be given to the following factors in the release area:

i. Weather and snow cover
ii. The wolves' reproductive cycle
iii. Presence and vulnerability of native prey
iv. Presence and timing of livestock operations
v. Hunting seasons
vi. Recreational and other uses (including permitted guide and outfitter activities)

5. Release area criteria
   a. Releases sites must be:
      i. Five or more miles from a town.
      ii. Three or more miles from a dwelling occupied year-round.
      iii. Three or more miles from Recovery Area boundaries.
      iv. In areas of adequate prey abundance (e.g. elk, deer, and other native ungulates), based on the best available information from the appropriate state or tribal wildlife agency.
   b. All release site evaluations shall also consider and address:
      i. Previous use of the site (if any), and outcomes from such use.
      ii. Presence of wolves – a release site shall not be used when it is within five miles of a den site that a pack of wolves is known to occupy.
      iii. Presence of humans – all human presence within five miles of the release site shall be evaluated.
      iv. Presence of livestock –all livestock use within five miles of the release site shall be evaluated, and all release sites should be as far away as possible from active livestock calving pastures.
      v. Recreational uses in the area – conflicts are to be avoided when possible.
      vi. Access to the area and security of the location – consider how much public use occurs (release pens should be safe from human intrusion), but also consider the ease of logistical (management) access by the IFT.
      vii. Habitat and site topography.
      viii. Availability of water – year-round access to water within two miles of the release site is preferred, but water is not a decision criterion for releases.
      ix. Expected need for supplemental feeding and monitoring (see SOP 8.0).
      x. Expected need for temporary area closures – proposals may recommend closure of areas within a one-mile radius of where a release pen would be built, for protection of wolves that will be temporarily restrained in the pen and which might use the pen area immediately post-release (see SOP 7.0). Whenever possible, travel on trails and roads shall be allowed, but travel off trail or road may be prohibited if necessary. If a wolf pack is suspected to have pups, a closure to prohibit dogs along open trails may also be recommended to prevent conflicts. In any case, closures should be proposed for as small an area as possible and for as brief a period as possible, and structured to address the specific circumstances for each site/area.

6. Public outreach for approved initial releases.
    a. The IFT shall notify (by phone or personal visit) local livestock permittees (i.e. those within five miles of the proposed release site), a local county official, and the local District Ranger not less than 30 calendar days prior to the release.
    b. The Lead Agencies shall collaborate in issuing a general news release, with copies to the local county government, not less than seven calendar days prior to the release.
    c. The Lead Agencies' shall collaborate in issuing a second general news release, with copies to the local county government, within seven calendar days following the release.

**Approvals:**

The Mexican Wolf Blue Range Reintroduction Project Adaptive Management Oversight Committee approved this SOP on November 23, 2004.

**References:**

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. 1998. 1998 Mexican Wolf Interagency Management Plan. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Albuquerque, New Mexico.

**Appendix A.** Format for an Interagency Field Team proposal for a Mexican wolf release that was approved, and implemented. This format may be expanded, but no fields may be deleted or not fully completed.

**Mexican Wolf Reintroduction Project**
**Interagency Field Team Recommendation**

**Summer 2004 Arizona Release Site**

**July 10, 2004**

The Interagency Field Team (IFT) recommends releasing a pack of Mexican wolves at Long Cienega, in the Primary Recovery Zone (PRZ) on the Alpine Ranger District, Apache-Sitgreaves National Forests, Greenlee County, Arizona. This document provides a justification for the release, an overview of the release-site selection process, a release-site profile, and a summary of public comment on the four candidate sites from which Long Cienega was selected.

**Justification for Release**

Population Status
During 2003 and January 2004, the IFT documented 15 mortalities in the reintroduction project. Most of these deaths were caused by humans. The deaths included six alpha wolves and one group of two sexually mature wolves traveling together for an extended period of time. Since the last of these mortalities occurred, the IFT has documented re-establishment of three packs and formation of three new groups of wolves. These new packs and groups resulted from uncollared wolves replacing some of the 15 mortalities. One pack and one group were subsequently removed from the population, because of depredation incidents. As of June 30, 2004, only six potential breeding units (pairs) were present in the wild population. This is well below the 12 breeding pairs the Final Environmental Impact Statement for the reintroduction project anticipated would be in the wild at this time. Thus, additional releases are necessary to continue progress toward project objectives.

Genetic Considerations
After incurring the losses discussed above (in Population Status), and removal of other wolves for management purposes, the number of free-ranging breeding units in this project had been reduced from ten to six pairs as of June 2004. Release of additional wolves is required to offset both the loss of breeding pairs, and to increase genetic diversity in the wild population.

Two wolves are available for release that would address both issues. Two were paired in the captive breeding program. They were paired because, as a pair, they would have a lower inbreeding coefficient (i.e. a measure of how closely they are related to each other) and lower mean kinship (i.e. a measure of how closely the two wolves are related to other wolves) than any of the current wild pairings. In addition, the male is more genetically diverse than any wolf in the wild or at the Sevilletta or Ladder Ranch acclimation facilities. The influx of genes into the wild population associated with this release would thus greatly enhance the genetic diversity of the

wild population. It would also balance representation of the various Mexican wolf lineages. Since this pair has bred in captivity, it is likely to contribute to the wild reproducing population.

**Overview of Release Site Selection Process**

Eighteen sites have been identified as potential release areas in Arizona. The IFT used seven criteria to review these sites to determine which one(s) to recommended for a 2004 release:

- Proximity to other wolves
- Available prey populations
- Proximity to livestock
- Proximity to humans
- Availability of water
- Site accessibility
- Recreational use

The IFT reduced the pool of candidate sites to four, due to presence of established packs or an inadequate prey base within the other release sites. The four remaining sites were: Long Cienega, Maness Peak, Fish Bench, and Campbell Flat (Table A). The IFT presented an overview of the proposed release and the four potential release sites at the January and April 2004 Mexican Wolf Adaptive Management Work Group meetings, and at a local stakeholder meeting in Blue River (Arizona) in April 2004. Questions and concerns were addressed at each meeting. Comments from the public were recorded in the form of meeting summary notes and personalized letters. The IFT carefully considered all concerns and comments while developing this recommendation.

**Public Comments and Concerns**

AGFD took summary notes for the AMWG meeting, and the Greenlee County Administrator took minutes for the Blue River stakeholder meeting. Both meetings affirmed strong opposition from local residents and ranchers to release of any wolves within the PRZ. The AMWG meeting also affirmed strong support within other sectors of the public for releases as a means of progress toward recovery objectives. Both meeting records are on file at the AGFD and the Greenlee County Commissioners' Office.

At both meetings, the local public conveyed long-standing frustration with the reintroduction project as it has operated from 1998 through 2004. They feel disenfranchised by the past decision-making process, by designation of the PRZ, and by lack of consideration of local opinions prior to approving the reintroduction project. In addition, they expressed concerns about the high cost of the reintroduction project; they consider it an inappropriate use of taxpayer dollars. None of the comment in these areas provided information the IFT could use to identify which, if any, of the four sites should be recommended for a 2004 wolf release.

Of the approximately 30 people at these meetings who expressed opposition to release of wolves into the PRZ, only two provided release-site location recommendations. One preferred Fish Bench, and the other suggested using Maness Peak. No specific reason was provided for either preference.

Specific concerns raised about the Long Cienega release site in the AMWG and Blue River meetings were: proximity to humans, proximity to domestic livestock and pets, inadequate prey base, and the ability of the IFT to respond to critical incidents and problem wolves. These concerns are addressed in the site analysis below. However, it should also be noted that wolves do travel long distances, so regardless of where they are released they can reasonably be expected to inhabit or travel through virtually any area or community in the PRZ.

Concern was also expressed in the AMWG and Blue River meetings regarding the potential for rabies to be transmitted from wild mammals (skunks, foxes, etc.) to released wolves, and the possible subsequent impact of rabid wolves on humans. The IFT noted that all wolves released, recaptured, or captured (i.e. wild-born wolves) are immunized against rabies.

With regard to other aspects of human safety, the AMWG and Blue River meeting participants were advised that the IFT continues to conduct public education/outreach efforts that include recommendations that humans take the same precautions with wolves that they do with black bears, mountain lions, coyotes, and other predators. The IFT noted that the wolf reintroduction project also has protocols and other mechanisms in place to provide for prompt handling of any critical incidents and conflicts with wolves.

**Preferred-Site Analysis**

Previous experience has shown that successful release sites require an appropriate prey base of elk, limited or no domestic cows calving in the area, and sufficient separation from established wolf pack territories. In addition, releasing wolves during the elk calving season provides them with a vulnerable source of prey, encourages them to feed on elk, and assists with the learning curve associated with killing prey (a behavior that released wolves are not accustomed to in captivity). Releasing wolf packs with pups also helps anchor the pack to an area, minimizing dispersal from the release site. Overall, synchronizing the time of release with the calving period of elk and releasing wolf packs with pups increases release success.

All of the aforementioned criteria, public comments, and past experience were considered in the release-site selection process (see attached Table). Based on these criteria, the IFT recommends Long Cienega as the preferred release site. The IFT also recommends that the release should involve the breeding pair of adults (with their pups) mentioned above, and should occur in mid-July while elk calves are still young.

Specific criteria and comments that IFT considered in the decision and responded to are:

- Fish Bench is occupied by a wolf pack that is denning close to the available release site. Also, it is located along the Black River, about five miles from the San Carlos Apache Reservation. The IFT is concerned that releasing wolves in Fish Bench (1) might cause inter-pack strife or mortality, and (2) likely would force wolves onto the Reservation – inevitably resulting in their removal, due to Tribal policy. Neither of these likely outcomes is desirable, so Fish Bench is not recommended as a 2004 release site.
- Maness Peak is vacant of wolves, but has a higher density of domestic cows with calves than any of the other candidate release sites. In addition, the area only has moderate elk

density, thus increasing the probability of wolf-cattle conflicts. Furthermore, Maness Peak is within three miles of many permanent dwellings along the Blue River road.

- Moonshine Park is three miles closer to the Blue River corridor of human occupancy than Long Cienega (thus some members of the public preferred Lon Cienega to Moonshine Park).
- Campbell Flat and Maness Peak are closer to permanent human dwellings and livestock than the Long Cienega site.
- The Long Cienega site has been approved by the U.S. Forest Service (USFS), in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act.
- The Long Cienega site was used in 2000 for release of the Cienega pack. Appropriate documentation is on file at the Forest Supervisor's office, Springerville, Arizona.

**Recommended Release Site Profile – Long Cienega**

Long Cienega is in a mixed-pine transition to spruce-fir habitat, with high ungulate density, limited presence of cattle, one human residence within five miles, no resident wolves, and ready access to perennial water. This site was used in 2000 for release of the Cienega pack, which reproduced successfully in the area for two years before shifting their territory to the north. When the Cienega pack was in the release site area, it had no documented conflicts with cattle or humans.

In 2003, the Steeple Creek fire burned a portion of the area surrounding the Long Cienega release site. Since the burn, aspen regeneration has been moderate to high, depending on the intensity of the fire. Initial surveys of the area by USFS and IFT personnel, revealed that elk have browsed on approximately 60-90 percent of the new aspen growth. USFS biologists believe that consumption of aspen by elk will eventually compromise aspen regeneration. This could increase the erosion potential, and decrease the rate at which the area will recover from the Steeple Creek fire. Based on these considerations, the USFS supports release of wolves in the Long Cienega area as a biological control to suppress the current and future effects of elk on the landscape.

To ensure that domestic cattle are not close to the proposed release site, the IFT coordinated with range personnel on the Alpine Ranger District. The range staff confirmed that the Long Cienega release site is in the Hannagan Allotment, which is currently vacant of livestock. Adjacent allotments in the surrounding area have cattle during the fall, winter, and spring, but most of the area within these allotments is more than five miles from the proposed release site.

When compared to the other three candidate sites, Long Cienega has fewer cattle and calves in proximity to the release site. It also has the lowest stocking density. USFS range personnel agree that Long Cienega is the most appropriate area in which to release wolves, from the perspective of minimizing conflicts with cattle.

The Long Cienega also is an acceptable distance from human residences, and has successfully been used as a release site in the past.

Based on these criteria, the IFT recommends Long Cienega as the 2004 release site.

Table A. Comparison of candidate release sites for 2004 Mexican wolf release in Arizona.

| | Long Cienega Release Site | Maness Peak Release Site | Campbell Flat Release Site | Fish Bench Release Site |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| General Location | E of Hannagan Meadow and NW of Blue Crossing. | SSE of Alpine, near AZ-NM Border. | SE of Blue Crossing, near AZ-NM Border. | WNW of Hannagan Meadow on Black River. |
| Prey Populations | Elk and deer densities in the area are high in comparison to other population estimates in the Alpine District. High elk densities are found at the higher elevations. High deer densities occur at mid-lower elevations, and moderate deer densities at higher elevations. | Elk and deer densities are moderate. These estimates are relative to other population densities within the Alpine District. | Elk and deer densities in the area are moderate and high respectively. These estimates are relative to other population densities within the Alpine District. | Elk and deer densities in the area are high. These estimates are relative to other population densities within the Alpine District. |
| Livestock (within five miles) | The allotment where the release site is located is currently in non-use, and there are no livestock in the surrounding area during the time of release. Three permittees with livestock during the fall, winter, and/or spring; Steeple Mesa 32 cow/calf, Red Hill, four horses, and Foote Creek 110 cow/calf. However, livestock are rotated seasonally throughout the allotments and only a portion of the allotments fall within five miles of the release site. | No livestock in Arizona during the time of release. Four permittees with livestock during winter and spring; private land 32 cow/calf, Bobcat-Johnson 15 cow/calf, Cow Flat 110 cow/calf, and Red Hill four horses. Livestock present in New Mexico on two allotments; one is active from late spring through early fall (226 cow/calf) and the other is active in summer (up to 247 cow/calf). During the release period, these cattle are actually using a distant pasture within the allotment. However, livestock are rotated seasonally throughout the allotments and only part of the | No livestock in Arizona during the time of release. Three permittees with livestock during the winter and spring; Bobcat-Johnson 15 cows, Cow Flat 110 cow/calf, and Red Hill, four horses. Livestock present in New Mexico on one allotment, active during the summer, with up to 247 cow/calf. However, livestock are rotated seasonally throughout the allotments and only a portion of the allotments fall within five miles of the release site. | The allotment where the release site is located is currently in non-use. Three permittees with livestock from late spring to early fall; combination of private and Sprucedale-Reno allotment with approximately 230 cow/calf and 85 horses, Grandfather 32 cow/calf, and PS 110 cow/calf. However, livestock are rotated seasonally throughout the allotments and only a portion of the allotments fall within five miles of the release site. |

| | Long Cienega Release Site | Maness Peak Release Site | Campbell Flat Release Site | Fish Bench Release Site |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | allotments fall within five miles of the release site. | | |
| Proximity to Humans (within five miles) | One permanent residence, Hannagan Meadow Lodge, in the area. Residents along the Blue River drainage, located approximately seven miles southeast of the proposed release site. However, the population is low and residents are sparsely located along the river. | Permanent residents are present along the Blue River drainage, located approximately two miles west of the proposed release site. However, the population is low and residents are sparsely located along the river. | Permanent residents are present along the Blue River drainage, located approximately six miles northwest of the proposed release site. However the population is low and residents are sparsely located along the river. | No residents in the area. Two permanent residences within seven miles. |
| Proximity to Other Wolves | The area is in close proximity to other wolf packs but does not fall within an established territory. | Wolves are absent from this area. | Wolves are absent from this area. | Area close to another wolf pack and within an established wolf pack territory. Release site adjacent to Black River, a direct corridor to the San Carlos Apache Reservation. |

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| Availability of Water | Year round access to water is available along Steeple Creek and Grant Creek. | Perennial water flow is available via streams and springs in the area including the Blue River, the Dry Blue, and Nolan Creek. | Year round access to water is available via Lamphier Creek and Little Blue Creek. | Year round access to water is available via the Black River, as well as several springs and tanks along Fish Bench and Fish Creek. |
| Accessibility | This area is within the Blue Range Primitive Area causing limited access. Due to the isolated location of the Long Cienega (Moonshine Park) site, equipment, wolves, and supplemental feed will have to be brought in by way of mules. | This site is road accessible via Forest Road 14 at its termination. The Blue River Road, Forest Road 28l is about 1.5 miles to the west, but the land in between is very rugged and very difficult to traverse, even on foot. | This area is within the Blue Range Primitive Area causing limited access. Due to the isolated location of the Campbell Flat site, equipment, wolves, and supplemental feed will have to be brought in by way of mules. | This area provides road access to the release site via Forest Road 83A. |
| Recreational Use | Low-moderate level of hunting, hiking, and camping in the area. Primitive modes of transportation required. These estimates are relative to other levels of hunting and recreational use within the Alpine District. | This area has moderate hunting and low recreational use, due to isolated conditions. These estimates are relative to other levels of hunting and recreational use within the Alpine District. | This area has low hunting and recreational use due to isolated conditions and limited accessibility. These estimates are relative to other levels of hunting and recreational use within the Alpine district. | Moderate level of hunting and fishing within the area. These estimates are relative to other levels of hunting and recreational use within the Alpine district. |